



Variants

The Journal of the European Society for Textual Scholarship

14 | 2019
Varia

James Joyce, Brouillons d'un baiser : premiers pas vers Finnegans Wake

Paris: Gallimard, 2014.

Sam Slote



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/variants/1134>

DOI: 10.4000/variants.1134

ISSN: 1879-6095

Publisher

European Society for Textual Scholarship

Printed version

Number of pages: 203-205

ISSN: 1573-3084

Electronic reference

Sam Slote, « James Joyce, Brouillons d'un baiser : premiers pas vers Finnegans Wake », *Variants* [Online], 14 | 2019, Online since 10 July 2019, connection on 25 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/variants/1134> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/variants.1134>

The authors

Review of *James Joyce, Brouillons d'un baiser: premiers pas vers Finnegans Wake*, ed. Daniel Ferrer, tr. Marie D'Arriussecq. Paris: Gallimard, 2014. 133 pp. ISBN 978-2-07-014374-0.

In March 2006 the National Library of Ireland acquired a small but significant tranche of Joyce manuscripts that hailed from the earliest phases of the composition and conceptualization of *Finnegans Wake*. The manuscripts fit within the already well-known series of Irish-themed vignettes that Joyce wrote in 1923 (Tristan and Isolde, Roderick O'Connor, St Patrick, St Kevin). Most of the new drafts were completely unanticipated and thus their appearance forced significant revisions upon our understanding of the genesis of *Finnegans Wake*. At the time of their discovery, along with my colleague Luca Crispi, I was in the final stages of editing the volume *How Joyce Wrote "Finnegans Wake"*; fortunately, we had enough time to incorporate a brief and preliminary assessment of these manuscripts and their significance. Now that a few years have passed, we can progress beyond preliminaries. Indeed, in 2012 — when Joyce's works entered the public domain in the EU and elsewhere — the NLI made high quality scans of all their Joyce holdings available online (<http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtls000252560>). The NLI material is not accessible from UK-based IP addresses because EU copyright law concerning posthumous and unpublished material is not harmonised.

The present volume — *Brouillons d'un baiser* — collects together the new NLI *Finnegans Wake* material supplemented with relevant, previously-known documents held at the British Library. The drafts are presented in the original language along with meticulous translations by the renowned novelist Marie D'Arriussecq. The volume also includes a significant introductory essay by Daniel Ferrer. This volume is not a genetic edition of the early *Wake* vignettes, but rather a selection — focused around the NLI holdings — that emphasises specific moments within the inception of *Finnegans Wake*. In effect, and this is meant as high praise, the volume should be considered as Ferrer's essay about the genesis of *Finnegans Wake* supplemented by draft transcriptions (and translations), and not as a volume of transcriptions of the *Wake's* earliest drafts accompanied by an introductory essay. In part, this assessment follows from the fact that the drafts are presented in linear (and not diplomatic) transcription, which slightly reduces their usability for genetic research even when considering the availability of the NLI's online scans.

In 1922, when Joyce began work on *Finnegans Wake*, he had little idea as to

what form his next book would take. In effect, as Ferrer convincingly argues, Joyce was also one of the writers paralysed by the audacity of *Ulysses*. The vignettes were thus little writing experiments that worked as points of possible inspiration in terms of narrative, theme and style. The new NLI drafts reveal that Joyce was more concerned with the story of Tristan and Isolde than most scholars had previously supposed. The one exception to this is David Hayman, who had previously proposed that at key moments in 1923 the story of Tristan and Isolde provided Joyce with a kind of narrational template from which he could begin, even as the subsequent development of the *Wake* progressed in directions that occulted this initial impetus. Ferrer argues that the new NLI drafts mostly corroborate Hayman's earlier assessment.

Joyce's first *Finnegans Wake* notebook includes entries from an article by Thomas Sturge Moore on the multiple versions of the legend of Tristan and Isolde, which suggests that Joyce was not just interested in the story as such but also in the fact that it exists in multiple configurations and, perhaps more interestingly, lacks a definitive *Ur*-version (Joyce's reading also includes Joseph Bédier's attempts to reconstruct an *Ur*-version). Likewise, the new NLI drafts show Joyce playing around with different versions and configurations of the story of Tristan and Isolde. Previously we only had known of one Tristan and Isolde vignette (or, more precisely, half a vignette, at the British Library, since its other half was missing until the announcement of the NLI acquisition) and now we have five. Ferrer's collection is centred around Joyce's different versions of Tristan and Isolde (and thus omits the other vignettes altogether) and emphasises how these different versions refract around a sloppy kiss Tristan gives to Isolde — hence the title of his volume, which translates as “drafts of a kiss”.

Ferrer's is not the only argument or arrangement possible with this material: Danis Rose has long proposed a different genealogy of the *Wake*'s early vignettes, that they were intended for a work sufficiently distinct from *Finnegans Wake* as to merit the title *Finn's Hotel* (which Rose published in 2013). However, Rose's theory relies on large amounts of conjecture. In contrast, Ferrer's theory is much closer to the texts themselves and is more attuned to the play of variations across the different documents presented. Indeed, the heart of his argument is a precise analysis of Joyce's mechanics of repeating and reprising narrative elements across his different versions of Tristan and Isolde. Ferrer argues that Joyce's patterns of revision across his vignettes are his way of thinking through the possibilities of myth, history and narration and, in this, the Tristan and Isolde vignettes comprise a matrix for *Wakean* style. That is, through the act of writing these vignettes — of writing and rewriting Tristan and Isolde — Joyce begins to learn how to write *Finnegans Wake*. Ferrer has argued elsewhere that a manuscript is not a text but rather a “protocol” for making a text. His introduction argues that for Joyce these vignettes represent Joyce's first steps towards the protocols of *Finnegans Wake* and that, likewise, for the reader they can offer an alternative mode of accessing Joyce's last book.

Overall Ferrer's essay is subtle, tightly-argued and persuasive. The transcriptions — despite being linear — are precise and accurate; the translations are elegant and, likewise, accurate. The transcriptions are well and copiously annotated and so this volume would even be useful for scholars bereft of a fluent French. It is one of the happy characteristics of Joyce studies that significant — even transformative — works of criticism appear outside the Anglosphere.

Sam Slote